

# Adult Learning

- **Adults are people with years of experience and a wealth of information.** Focus on the strengths learners bring to the classroom, not just gaps in their knowledge. Provide opportunities for dialogue within the group. Tap their experience as a major source of enrichment to the class. Remember that you do not need to have all the answers, as long as you know where to go or who to call to get the answers. Students can be resources to you and to each other.  
**Hints:** Be aware of potential Post Traumatic Stress reactions when talking about specific topics. Some people have lived through death and destruction already. Don't assume the audience knows everything. Explain acronyms. Explain to the level of the least experienced person.
- **Adults have established values, beliefs and opinions.** Demonstrate respect for differing beliefs, religions, value systems and lifestyles. Let your learners know that they are entitled to their values, beliefs and opinions, but that everyone in the room may not share their beliefs. Allow debate and challenge of ideas.
- **Adults are people whose style and pace of learning has probably changed.** Learning is enhanced by stimulating the senses. Use a variety of teaching strategies such as auditory (recordings or lecture), visual (video or demonstration), tactile (hands on practice) and participatory methods (group discussion and problem solving). Reaction time and speed of learning may be slow, but the ability to learn is not impaired by age. *Most adults prefer teaching methods other than lecture.*
- **Adults relate new knowledge and information to previously learned information and experiences.** Assess the specific learning needs of your audience before your class or at the beginning of the class. Present single concepts and focus on application of concepts to relevant practical situations. Summarize frequently to increase retention and recall. Material outside of the context of participants' experiences and knowledge becomes meaningless.
- **Adults are people with bodies influenced by gravity.** Plan frequent breaks, even if they are 2-minute "stretch" breaks. During a lecture, a short break every 45-60 minutes is sufficient. In more interactive teaching situations, breaks can be spaced 60-90 minutes apart.
- **Adults have egos.** Support the students as individuals. Self-esteem and ego are at risk in a classroom environment that is not perceived as safe or supportive. People will not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of being put down or ridiculed. Allow people to admit confusion, ignorance, fears, biases and different opinions. Acknowledge or thank students for their responses and questions. Treat all questions and comments with respect. Avoid saying "I just covered that" when someone asks a repetitive question. Remember, the only foolish question is the unasked question.  
**Hint:** Instructors who act as if they "Know it all" will be less effective than those who convey information as if the students are their equals. Give structured, helpful feedback and encouragement regularly.
- **Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.** Engage the students in a process of mutual inquiry. Avoid merely transmitting knowledge or expecting total agreement. Don't "spoon-feed" the participants.  
**Hint:** Conduct group activities or ask thought provoking questions that will help participants draw their own conclusions. Ask What if? Encourage them to ask What if?
- **Adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning.** Emphasize how learning can be applied in a practical setting. Use case studies, problem solving groups, and participatory activities to enhance learning. Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations.  
**Hint:** Offer simple, practical suggestions that can easily be incorporated into daily routine. Once they feel successful, they'll want to tackle the more difficult challenges.
- **Adults like to participate in small-group activities.** Move students beyond understanding to application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Small-group activities provide an opportunity to share, reflect, and generalize their learning experiences.
- **Transfer of learning for an adult is not automatic and must be facilitated.** Coaching and other kinds of follow-up support are needed to help adult learners transfer learning into daily practice so that it is sustained.  
**Hint:** Arrange for supplemental training and exercises!

There are four critical elements of learning that must be addressed to ensure that participants learn. These elements are:

1. motivation
2. reinforcement
3. retention
4. transference

## Motivation

Another aspect of adult learning is motivation. At least six factors serve as sources of motivation for adult learning:

- **Social relationships:** to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.
- **External expectations:** to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
- **Social welfare:** to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.
- **Personal advancement:** to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors.
- **Escape/Stimulation:** to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.
- **Cognitive interest:** to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind.

## Barriers to Motivation/Learning

Adults have many responsibilities that they must balance against the demands of learning. Because of these responsibilities, adults have *barriers against participating in learning*. Some of these barriers include:

Lack of time, money, confidence, or interest, lack of information about opportunities to learn, scheduling problems, "red tape," and problems with child care and transportation.

The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to *enhance* their reasons for enrolling and *decrease* the barriers. Instructors must know their audience and tie training to their greatest motivators. A successful strategy includes showing adult learners the relationship between training and an expected outcome.

If the participant does not recognize the need for the information (or has been offended or intimidated), all of the instructor's effort to assist the participant to learn will be in vain. The instructor must establish rapport with participants and prepare them for learning; this provides motivation. Instructors can motivate students via several means:

- **Set a feeling or tone for the lesson.** Instructors should try to establish a friendly, open atmosphere that shows the participants they will help them learn.
- **Set an appropriate level of concern.** The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established in the class. However, people learn best under low to moderate stress; if the stress is too high, it becomes a barrier to learning.
- **Set an appropriate level of difficulty.** The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload. The instruction should predict and reward participation, culminating in success.

In addition, participants need specific knowledge of their learning results. Feedback must be specific, not general. Participants must also see a *reward* for learning. The reward does not necessarily have to be monetary; it can be simply a demonstration of benefits to be realized from learning the material. Finally, the participant must be **interested** in the subject. Interest is directly related to reward. Adults must see the benefit of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn the subject.

**Reinforcement.** Reinforcement is a very necessary part of the teaching/learning process; through it, instructors encourage correct modes of behavior and performance.

- *Positive reinforcement* is normally used by instructors who are teaching participants new skills. As the name implies, positive reinforcement is "good" and reinforces "good" (or positive) behavior.

*Negative reinforcement* is normally used by instructors teaching a new skill or new information. It is useful in trying to change modes of behavior. The result of negative reinforcement is *extinction* -- that is, the instructor uses negative reinforcement until the "bad" behavior disappears, or it becomes extinct.

**Retention.** Students must retain information from classes in order to benefit from the learning. The instructors' jobs are not finished until they have assisted the learner in retaining the information. In order for participants to retain the information taught, they must see a meaning or purpose for that information. They must also understand and be able to interpret and apply the information. This understanding includes their ability to assign the correct degree of importance to the material.

The amount of retention will be directly affected by the degree of original learning. Simply stated, if the participants did not learn the material well initially, they will not retain it well either.

Retention by the participants is directly affected by their amount of practice during the learning. Instructors should emphasize retention and application. After the students demonstrate correct (desired) performance, they should be urged to practice to maintain the desired performance. Distributed practice is similar in effect to intermittent reinforcement.

**Transference.** Transfer of learning is the result of training -- it is the ability to use the information taught in the course but in a new setting. As with reinforcement, there are two types of transfer: *positive* and *negative*.

- Positive transference, like positive reinforcement, occurs when the participants use the behavior taught in the course.
- Negative transference, again like negative reinforcement, occurs when the participants do not do what they are told not to do. This results in a positive (desired) outcome.

Transference is most likely to occur in the following situations:

- *Association* -- participants can associate the new information with something that they already know.
- *Similarity* -- the information is similar to material that participants already know; that is, it revisits a logical framework or pattern.
- *Degree of original learning* -- participant's degree of original learning was high.
- *Critical attribute element* -- the information learned contains elements that are extremely beneficial (critical) on the job.